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The *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*

William H. Grosnick

The *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* is a short but extremely influential Mahāyāna Buddhist text that was probably composed sometime around the middle of the third century C.E. It is the sūtra that introduced into the Mahāyāna tradition the notion of the tathāgatagarbha, the idea that all beings have latent within themselves all the virtues of a buddha (*tathāgata*), but that those virtues are hidden by a covering (*garbha*) of passion and anguish (the so-called kleśas of greed, anger, lust, confusion, and so on). The central message of the sūtra is that when those kleśas are removed, the buddhahood that is potential in all beings will be revealed.

The idea of the tathāgatagarbha was later to form the nucleus of the concept of buddha nature (*buddhadhātu*) in the Sino-Japanese Buddhist tradition. And concepts of both the tathāgatagarbha and the buddha nature underwent extensive doctrinal development in important Mahāyāna sūtras and influential commentaries. But whereas later treatises generally give a highly philosophical interpretation to the tathāgatagarbha, it is doubtful that any such sophisticated understanding was intended by the author(s) of the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*. In the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, the concept of the tathāgatagarbha is promulgated primarily to inspire beings with the confidence to seek buddhahood, and to persuade them that despite their poverty, suffering, and bondage to passion, they still have the capacity to attain the ultimate goal of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the perfect enlightenment of the Tathāgata.

The term *tathāgatagarbha* has often been translated by Western scholars as “matrix of the tathāgata,” but “matrix” does not exhaust the wide range of meanings of the Sanskrit term *garbha*. The author of the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* seems to have been well aware of this, since he employs many of these different meanings of *garbha* in the various similes with which he illustrates the meaning of the tathāgatagarbha. In its most common usage, *garbha* means “womb,” and the eighth simile of the sūtra likens the tathāgatagarbha to an impoverished, vile, and ugly woman who bears a noble, world-conquering king in her womb. But *garbha* can also mean “fetus,” so the *garbha* in the eighth simile may also refer to the son

who is within her womb. Garbha can also refer to the calyx of a flower, the cuplike leafy structure that enfolds the blossom, and the image in the sūtra's opening scene of conjured buddha forms seated within lotus flowers seems to be predicated on this meaning. Garbha can also mean "inner room," or "hidden chamber," or "sanctuary" (as in the garbhagṛha of a Hindu temple, which houses the image of the deity, or the rounded dome [garbha] of a Buddhist stūpa, which houses the precious relics of the Buddha). It is probably this meaning of garbha that the author of the sūtra intends in the fifth simile of the sūtra, when he speaks of the tathāgatagarbha as being like a hidden chamber or a secret store of treasure hidden beneath the house of a poor man. (The Chinese may have had this simile in mind when they chose the term *tsang*, "secret store," to translate *garbha*). Garbha can also refer to the outer husk that covers a fruit or seed or, by extension, to the seed itself. The third and sixth similes of the sūtra, which compare the tathāgatagarbha to the useless husk surrounding an edible kernel of wheat and to the mango pit that can grow into the most regal of trees, make direct use of this sense. Finally, garbha can refer to the inside, middle, or interior of anything, and it is this widest meaning that the author of the sūtra is employing when he likens the tathāgatagarbha to gold hidden inside a pit of waste, to honey hidden inside a swarm of angry bees, or to a golden statue hidden inside a wrapping of dirty rags or within a blackened mold.

The majority of the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*'s similes portray something extremely precious, valuable, or noble (such as buddhas, honey, kernels of wheat, gold, treasure, golden statues, or future princes), contained within something abhorrent and vile (such as rotting petals, angry bees, useless husks, excrement, poor hovels, dirty rags, soot-covered molds, and impoverished, ugly women). So the central meaning of the tathāgatagarbha concept is clear: within each and every person there exists something extremely valuable—the possibility of becoming a tathāgata—but that valuable potential for buddhahood is hidden by something vile—the sufferings and passions and vicissitudes of life. But to carry the interpretation further and to look for a deeper meaning to the tathāgatagarbha concept of this early text would probably be wrong, for when one looks more closely at the various similes used to illustrate the tathāgatagarbha, certain inconsistencies begin to emerge. For example, although most of the similes portray the precious reality within as something already complete in itself, two of the similes clearly indicate that the precious reality will only reach its perfected state in the future. The conjured buddhas within the lotus flowers are already fully enlightened, the honey and the wheat kernel are already edible, the gold in the waste pit is already pure and in no need of refinement, and the golden statues are already fully cast, whereas, by contrast, it will take many years for the embryo in the poor woman's womb to become a world conqueror, and more years still for the mango pit to become a full-grown tree.

The text translated is the Chinese translation by Buddhahadra, *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (Tokyo, 1924–1934), 666, vol. 16, pp. 457a1–460b20.

The Mahāvaiṣṭya Tathāgatarbha Sūtra

Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying on the Vulture Peak near Rājagṛha in the lecture hall of a many-tiered pavilion built of fragrant sandalwood. He had attained buddhahood ten years previously and was accompanied by an assembly of hundreds and thousands of great monks and a throng of bodhisattvas and great beings sixty times the number of sands in the Ganges River. All had perfected their zeal and had formerly made offerings to hundreds of thousands of myriad legions of buddhas. All could turn the irreversible wheel of the dharma. If a being were to hear their names, he would become irreversible in the highest path. Their names were Bodhisattva Dharma-Wisdom, Bodhisattva Lion-Wisdom, Bodhisattva Adamantine Wisdom (Vajramati), Bodhisattva Harmonious Wisdom, Bodhisattva Wonderful Wisdom, Bodhisattva Moonlight, Bodhisattva Jeweled Moon, Bodhisattva Full Moon, Bodhisattva Courageous, Bodhisattva Measureless Courage, Bodhisattva Transcending the Triple World, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta, Bodhisattva Fragrant Elephant, Bodhisattva Fine Fragrance, Bodhisattva Finest Fragrance, Bodhisattva Main Treasury, Bodhisattva Sun Treasury, Bodhisattva Display of the Standard, Bodhisattva Display of the Great Standard, Bodhisattva Stainless Standard, Bodhisattva Boundless Light, Bodhisattva Bestower of Light, Bodhisattva Stainless Light, Bodhisattva King of Joy, Bodhisattva Eternal Joy, Bodhisattva Jeweled Hand, Bodhisattva Treasury of Space, Bodhisattva King of Light and Virtue, Bodhisattva Self-Abiding King of Dhāraṇīs, Bodhisattva Dhāraṇī, Bodhisattva Destroying All Ills, Bodhisattva Relieving All the Ills of Sentient Beings, Bodhisattva Joyous Thoughts, Bodhisattva Satisfied Will, Bodhisattva Eternally Satisfied, Bodhisattva Shining on All, Bodhisattva Moon Brightness, Bodhisattva Jewel Wisdom, Bodhisattva Transforming into a Woman's Body, Bodhisattva Great Thunderclap, Bodhisattva Spiritual Guide, Bodhisattva Not Groundless Views, Bodhisattva Freedom in All Dharma, Bodhisattva Maitreya, and Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. There were also present bodhisattvas and great beings just like them from countless buddha lands, whose number equaled sixty times the number of sands in the Ganges River. Together with an uncountable number of gods, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kinnaras, and mahoragas [all divine and quasi-divine beings], they all gathered to pay their respects and make offerings.

At that time, the Buddha sat up straight in meditation in the sandalwood pavilion and, with his supernatural powers, put on a miraculous display. There appeared in the sky a countless number of thousand-petaled lotus flowers as large as chariot wheels, filled with colors and fragrances that one could not begin to enumerate. In the center of each flower was a conjured image of a buddha. The flowers rose and covered the heavens like a jeweled banner, each flower giving forth countless rays of light. The petals all simultaneously unfolded their splendor and then, through the Buddha's miraculous powers, all withered in an instant. Within the flowers all the buddha images sat cross-

legged in lotus position, and each issued forth countless hundreds of thousands of rays of light. The adornment of the spot at the time was so extraordinary that the whole assembly rejoiced and danced ecstatically. In fact, it was so very strange and extraordinary that all began to wonder why all the countless wonderful flowers should suddenly be destroyed. As they withered and darkened, the smell they gave off was foul and loathsome.

But at that point the World-honored One realized why the bodhisattvas were perplexed, so he addressed Vajramati ("Adamantine Wisdom"), saying, "O good son. If there is anything in the Buddha's teaching that perplexes you, feel free to ask about it." Bodhisattva Vajramati knew that everyone in the whole assembly was perplexed, and so addressed the Buddha, saying, "O World-honored One, why are there conjured buddha images in all of the innumerable flowers? And for what reason did they ascend into the heavens and cover the world? And why did the buddha images each issue forth countless hundreds of thousands of rays of light?" Everyone in the assembly looked on and then joined his hands together in respect. At that point, Bodhisattva Vajramati spoke in verses, saying:

Never ever have I witnessed
 A miraculous display like today's.
 To see hundreds of thousands and millions of buddhas
 Seated in the calyxes of lotus flowers,
 Each emitting countless streams of light,
 Filling all the fields,
 Scattering the dirt of false teachers,
 Adorning all the worlds!
 The lotuses suddenly wilted;
 There was not one which was not disgusting.
 Now tell us,
 Why did you display this conjured vision?
 We see buddhas more numerous than
 The sands of the Ganges,
 And incalculable transfigured forms.
 Never before have I seen
 The like of what I am witnessing now.
 I wish you would give us a clear explanation.

At that time the World-honored One spoke to Vajramati and the other bodhisattvas, saying, "Good sons, there is a great vaipulya-sūtra called the '*Tathāgatarbha*.' It was because I wanted to expound it to you that I showed you these signs. You should all listen attentively and ponder it well." All said, "Excellent. We very much wish to hear it."

The Buddha said, "Good sons, there is a comparison that can be drawn between the countless flowers conjured up by the Buddha that suddenly withered and the innumerable conjured buddha images with their many adorn-

ments, seated in lotus position within the flowers, who cast forth light so exceedingly rare that there was no one in the assembly who did not show reverence. In a similar fashion, good sons, when I regard all beings with my buddha eye, I see that hidden within the kleśas of greed, desire, anger, and stupidity there is seated augustly and unmovingly the tathāgata's wisdom, the tathāgata's vision, and the tathāgata's body. Good sons, all beings, though they find themselves with all sorts of kleśas, have a tathāgatagarbha that is eternally unsullied, and that is replete with virtues no different from my own. Moreover, good sons, it is just like a person with supernatural vision who can see the bodies of tathāgatas seated in lotus position inside the flowers, even though the petals are not yet unfurled; whereas after the wilted petals have been removed, those tathāgatas are manifested for all to see. In similar fashion, the Buddha can really see the tathāgatagarbhas of sentient beings. And because he wants to disclose the tathāgatagarbha to them, he expounds the sūtras and the dharma, in order to destroy kleśas and reveal the buddha nature. Good sons, such is the dharma of all the buddhas. Whether or not buddhas appear in the world, the tathāgatagarbhas of all beings are eternal and unchanging. It is just that they are covered by sentient beings' kleśas. When the Tathāgata appears in the world, he expounds the dharma far and wide to remove their ignorance and tribulation and to purify their universal wisdom. Good sons, if there is a bodhisattva who has faith in this teaching and who practices it single-mindedly, he will attain liberation and true, universal enlightenment, and for the sake of the world he will perform buddha deeds far and wide."

At that point, the World-honored One expressed himself in verses, saying:

It is like the wilted flowers;
 Before their petals have opened,
 One with supernatural vision can see
 The unstained body of the Tathāgata.
 After the wilted flowers are removed,
 One sees, without obstacle, the Teacher,
 Who, in order to sever kleśas,
 Triumphantly appears in the world.
 The Buddha sees that all kinds of beings
 Universally possess the tathāgatagarbha.
 It is covered by countless kleśas,
 Just like a tangle of smelly, wilted petals.
 So I, on behalf of all beings,
 Everywhere expound the true dharma,
 In order to help them remove their kleśas
 And quickly reach the buddha way.
 I see with my buddha eye
 That in the bodies of all beings
 There lies concealed the buddhagarbha,
 So I expound the dharma in order to reveal it.

“Or good sons, it is like pure honey in a cave or a tree, surrounded and protected by a countless swarm of bees. It may happen that a person comes along who knows some clever techniques. He first gets rid of the bees and takes the honey, and then does as he will with it, eating it or giving it away far and wide. Similarly, good sons, all sentient beings have the tathāgatagarbha. It is like pure honey in a cave or tree, but it is covered by kleśas, which, like a swarm of bees, keep one from getting to it. With my buddha eye I see it clearly, and with appropriate skillful techniques I expound the dharma, in order to destroy kleśas and reveal the buddha vision. And everywhere I perform buddha deeds for the benefit of the world.” Thereupon the World-honored One expressed himself in verses, saying:

It is just like what happens when the honey in a cave or tree,
 Though surrounded by countless bees,
 Is taken by someone who knows a clever technique
 To first get rid of the swarm.
 The tathāgatagarbha of sentient beings
 Is like the honey in a cave or tree.
 The entanglement of ignorance and tribulation
 Is like the swarm of bees
 That keep one from getting to it.
 For the sake of all beings,
 I expound the true dharma with skillful means,
 Removing the bees of kleśas,
 Revealing the tathāgatagarbha.
 Endowed with eloquence that knows no obstacle,
 I preach the dharma of sweet dew,
 Compassionately relieving sentient beings,
 Everywhere helping them to true enlightenment.

“Or, good sons, it is like a kernel of wheat that has not yet had its husk removed. Someone who is impoverished might foolishly disdain it, and consider it to be something that should be discarded. But when it is cleaned, the kernel can always be used. In like fashion, good sons, when I observe sentient beings with my buddha eye, I see that the husk of kleśas covers their limitless tathāgata vision. So with appropriate skillful means I expound the dharma, to enable them to remove those kleśas, purify their universal wisdom, and to attain in all worlds the highest true enlightenment.” Thereupon, the World-honored One expressed this in verses, saying:

It is just like what happens when all the kernels,
 The husks of which have not yet been washed away,
 Are disdained by someone who is impoverished,
 And said to be something to be discarded.
 But although the outside seems like something useless,
 The inside is genuine and not to be destroyed.

After the husks are removed,
 It becomes food fit for a king.
 I see that all kinds of beings
 Have a buddhagarbha hidden by kleśas.
 I preach the removal of those things
 To enable them to attain universal wisdom.
 Just as I have a tathāgata nature,
 So do all beings.
 When they develop it and purify it,
 They quickly attain the highest path.

“Or, good sons, it is like genuine gold that has fallen into a pit of waste and been submerged and not seen for years. The pure gold does not decay, yet no one knows that it is there. But suppose there came along someone with supernatural vision, who told people, ‘Within the impure waste there is a genuine gold trinket. You should get it out and do with it as you please.’ Similarly, good sons, the impure waste is your innumerable kleśas. The genuine gold trinket is your tathāgatagarbha. For this reason, the Tathāgata widely expounds the dharma to enable all beings to destroy their kleśas, attain true enlightenment, and perform buddha deeds.”

At that time the World-honored One expressed himself in verses, saying:

It is just like what happens when gold is submerged
 In impure waste, where no one can see it.
 But someone with supernatural vision sees it
 And tells people about it, saying
 ‘If you get it out and wash it clean,
 You may do with it as you will,’
 Which causes their relatives and family to all rejoice.
 The Well-departed One’s vision is like this.
 He sees that for all kinds of beings,
 The tathāgata nature is not destroyed,
 Though it is submerged in the muddy silt of kleśas.
 So he appropriately expounds the dharma
 And enables them to manage all things,
 So that the kleśas covering the buddha nature
 Are quickly removed and beings are purified.

“Or, good sons, it is like a store of treasure hidden beneath an impoverished household. The treasure cannot speak and say that it is there, since it isn’t conscious of itself and doesn’t have a voice. So no one can discover this treasure store. It is just the same with sentient beings. But there is nothing that the power of the Tathāgata’s vision is afraid of. The treasure store of the great dharma is within sentient beings’ bodies. It does not hear and it is not aware of the addictions and delusions of the five desires. The wheel of saṃsāra turns and beings are subjected to countless sufferings. Therefore buddhas appear in

the world and reveal to them the dharma store of the tathāgata in their bodies. And they believe in it and accept it and purify their universal wisdom. Everywhere on behalf of beings he reveals the tathāgatagarbha. He employs an eloquence which knows no obstacle on behalf of the Buddhist faithful. In this way, good sons, with my buddha eye I see that all beings possess the tathāgatagarbha. And so on behalf of bodhisattvas I expound this dharma.” At that point, the Tathāgata expressed himself in verses, saying:

It is like a store of treasure
 Inside the house of an impoverished man.
 The owner is not aware of it,
 Nor can the treasure speak.
 For a very long time it is buried in darkness,
 As there is no one who can tell of its presence.
 When you have treasure but do not know of it,
 This causes poverty and suffering.
 When the buddha eye observes sentient beings,
 It sees that, although they transmigrate
 Through the five realms of reincarnation,
 There is a great treasure in their bodies
 That is eternal and unchanging.
 When he sees this, the Buddha
 Teaches on behalf of all beings,
 Enabling them to attain the treasure-store of wisdom,
 And the great wealth of widely caring for one another.
 If you believe what I have taught you
 About all having a treasure store,
 And practice it faithfully and ardently,
 Employing skillful means,
 You will quickly attain the highest path.

“Or, good sons, it is like the pit inside a mango (*āmra*) fruit which does not decay. When you plant it in the ground, it grows into the largest and most regal of trees. In the same manner, good sons, when I look at sentient beings with my buddha vision, I see that the tathāgatagarbha is surrounded by a husk of ignorance, just as the seeds of a fruit are only found at its core. Good sons, that tathāgatagarbha is cold and unripe. It is the profound quiescence of nirvāṇa that is brought about by great wisdom. It is called the truly enlightened one, the tathāgata, the arhat, and so on. Good sons, after the Tathāgata has observed sentient beings, he reveals this message in order to purify the wisdom of bodhisattvas and great beings.”

At that point, the World-honored One expressed himself in verses, saying:

It is just like the pit of a mango fruit
 Which does not decay.
 Plant it in the earth

And inevitably a great tree grows.
 The Tathāgata's faultless vision
 Sees that the tathāgatagarbha
 Within the bodies of sentient beings
 Is just like the seed within a flower or fruit.
 Though ignorance covers the buddhagarbha,
 You ought to have faith and realize
 That you are possessed of samādhi wisdom,
 None of which can be destroyed.
 For this reason I expound the dharma
 And reveal the tathāgatagarbha,
 That you may quickly attain the highest path,
 Just as a fruit grows into the most regal of trees.

“Or, good sons, it is like a man with a statue of pure gold, who was to travel through the narrow roads of another country and feared that he might be victimized and robbed. So he wrapped the statue in worn-out rags so that no one would know that he had it. On the way the man suddenly died, and the golden statue was discarded in an open field. Travelers trampled it and it became totally filthy. But a person with supernatural vision saw that within the worn-out rags there was a pure gold statue, so he unwrapped it and all paid homage to it. Similarly, good sons, I see the different sentient beings with their many kleśas, transmigrating through the long night of endless saṃsāra, and I perceive that within their bodies is the wondrous garbha of the tathāgata. They are august and pure and no different from myself. For this reason the Buddha expounds the dharma for sentient beings, that they might sever those kleśas and purify their tathāgata wisdom. I turn the wheel of the dharma again and again in order to convert all worlds.”

At that point, the World-honored One expressed himself in verses, saying:

It is like a traveler to another country
 Carrying a gold statue,
 Who wraps it in dirty, worn-out rags
 And discards it in an unused field.
 One with supernatural vision sees it
 And tells other people about it.
 They remove the dirty rags and reveal the statue
 And all rejoice greatly.
 My supernatural vision is like this.
 I see that beings of all sorts
 Are entangled in kleśas and evil actions
 And are plagued with all the sufferings of saṃsāra.
 Yet I also see that within
 The dust of ignorance of all beings,
 The tathāgata nature sits motionless,

Great and indestructible.
 After I have seen this,
 I explain to bodhisattvas that
 Kleśas and evil actions
 Cover the most victorious body.
 You should endeavor to sever them,
 And manifest the tathāgata wisdom.
 It is the refuge of all—
 Gods, men, nāgas, and spirits.

“Or, good sons, it is like a woman who is impoverished, vile, ugly, and hated by others, who bears a noble son in her womb. He will become a sage king, a ruler of all the four directions. But she does not know his future history, and constantly thinks of him as a base-born, impoverished child. In like fashion, good sons, the Tathāgata sees that all sentient beings are carried around by the wheel of saṃsāra, receiving suffering and poison, but their bodies possess the tathāgata’s treasure store. Just like that woman, they do not realize this. This is why the Tathāgata everywhere expounds the dharma, saying, ‘Good sons, do not consider yourselves inferior or base. You all personally possess the buddha nature.’ If you exert yourselves and destroy your past evils, then you will receive the title of bodhisattvas or world-honored ones, and convert and save countless sentient beings.”

At that point, the World-honored One expressed himself in verses, saying:

It is like an impoverished woman
 Whose appearance is common and vile,
 But who bears a son of noble degree
 Who will become a universal monarch.
 Replete with seven treasures and all virtues,
 He will possess as king the four quarters of the earth.
 But she is incapable of knowing this
 And conceives only thoughts of inferiority.
 I see that all beings
 Are like infants in distress.
 Within their bodies is the tathāgatagarbha,
 But they do not realize it.
 So I tell bodhisattvas,
 ‘Be careful not to consider yourselves inferior.
 Your bodies are tathāgatagarbhas;
 They always contain
 The light of the world’s salvation.’
 If you exert yourselves
 And do not spend a lot of time
 Sitting in the meditation hall,

You will attain the path of very highest realization
And save limitless beings.

“Or, good sons, it is like a master foundryman casting a statue of pure gold. After casting is complete, it is inverted and placed on the ground. Although the outside is scorched and blackened, the inside is unchanged. When it is opened and the statue taken out, the golden color is radiant and dazzling. Similarly, good sons, when the Tathāgata observes all sentient beings, he sees that the buddhagarbha is inside their bodies replete with all its many virtues. After seeing this, he reveals far and wide that all beings will obtain relief. He removes kleśas with his adamant wisdom, and reveals the buddha body like a person uncovering a golden statue.”

At that point, the World-honored One expressed himself in verses, saying:

It is like a great foundry
With countless golden statues.
Foolish people look at the outside
And see only the darkened earthen molds.
The master foundryman estimates that they have cooled,
And opens them to extract their contents.
All impurity is removed
And the features clearly revealed.
With my buddha vision
I see that all sentient beings are like this.
Within the mud shell of passions,
All have the tathāgata-nature.
By means of adamant wisdom,
We break the mold of kleśas
And reveal the tathāgatarbha,
Like pure, shining gold.
Just as I have seen this
And so instructed all the bodhisattvas,
So should you accept it,
And convert in turn all other beings.

At that point, the World-honored One spoke to Vajramati and the other bodhisattvas and great beings, saying, “Whether you are monks or laypersons, good sons and daughters, you should accept, recite, copy, revere, and widely expound this *Tathāgatarbha Sūtra* for the benefit of others. The virtues that you will derive from it are inestimable. Vajramati, if there were a bodhisattva who, for the sake of the buddha path, worked diligently and assiduously, or who cultivated spiritual powers, or who entered all of the samādhis, or who desired to plant the roots of virtue, or who worshiped the buddhas of the present, more numerous than the sands of the Ganges River, or who erected more seven-jeweled stūpas than there are sands in the Ganges River, of a height

of ten yojanas [one yojana equals about nine miles] and a depth and breadth of one yojana, or who set up in those stūpas seven-jeweled couches covered with divine paintings, or who daily erected for each buddha more seven-jeweled stūpas than there are sands in the Ganges River, and who presented them to each tathāgata and bodhisattva and śrāvaka in the assembly, or who did this sort of thing everywhere for all the present-day buddhas, whose number is greater than the sands of the Ganges River, or who erected fifty times more jeweled stūpas than there are sands in the Ganges River and who presented them as an offering to fifty times more buddhas and bodhisattvas and śrāvakas in the assembly than there are sands in the Ganges River, and who did this for countless hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands of eons, O Vajramati, that bodhisattva would still not be the equal of the person who finds joy and enlightenment in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, who accepts it, recites it, copies it, or even reveres but a single one of its metaphors. O Vajramati, even though the number of good roots and virtues planted by those good sons on behalf of the buddhas is incalculable, it does not come to a hundredth or a thousandth or any possible calculable fraction of the number of virtues attained by the good sons and daughters who revere the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*.”

At that point, the World-honored One expressed himself in verses, saying:

If there is a person seeking enlightenment
 Who listens to and accepts this sūtra,
 And who copies and reveres
 Even a single verse,
 The subtle and profound garbha of the Tathāgata
 Will instantly come forth, accompanied with joy.
 If you give yourself to this true teaching
 Your virtues will be incalculable.
 If there is a person seeking enlightenment
 Who has attained great spiritual powers,
 And who desires to make an offering
 To the buddhas of the ten directions
 And to the bodhisattvas and śrāvakas of the assembly,
 The number of which is greater
 Than the sands of the Ganges,
 A hundred million times incalculable;
 If for each of the buddhas
 He constructed a marvelous jeweled stūpa
 Ten yojanas in height
 And a breadth of forty li [one li equals about one-third of a mile],
 Within which he would bestow a seven-jeweled seat,
 With all the marvels
 Appropriate for the august Teacher,
 Covered with divine pictures and cushions,

Each one with its own unique designs;
 If he offered to the buddhas and the saṅgha
 An incalculable number of these,
 More than the sands of the Ganges River,
 And if he offered them
 Without ceasing day or night
 For hundreds and thousands
 And tens of thousands of eons,
 The virtues he would obtain in this manner
 Could not be compared with
 The far greater virtues of
 The wise person who listens to this sūtra,
 Who accepts even a single metaphor from it
 And who explains it for the benefit of others.
 Beings who take refuge in it
 Will quickly attain the highest path.
 Bodhisattvas who devote their thought
 To the profound tathāgatagarbha,
 Know that all beings possess it
 And quickly attain the highest path.

At that time the World-honored One again addressed Bodhisattva Vajramati, saying, "An incalculable time far back in the distant past, longer ago than many inconceivable countless eons, there was a buddha who was called the Eternally Light-Bestowing King, the Tathāgata, the Arhat, the Truly Enlightened One, the One Possessed of Shining Actions, the One Who has Well Transcended the World, the Master Who Has Grasped the Highest, the Hero of Harmony, the Teacher of Men and Gods, the Buddha, the World-honored One. O Vajramati, why was he called the Eternally Light-bestowing King? When that buddha was originally practicing the bodhisattva path and descended as a spirit into his mother's womb, he always gave off light which penetrated and illuminated in an instant even the tiniest atoms of all the thousands of buddha worlds in the ten directions. Any being who saw this light was filled with joy. His kleśas were destroyed; he became endowed with the power of form; his wisdom was perfected; and he attained an eloquence which knew no obstacle. If a denizen of hell, a hungry ghost, an animal, King Yama, Lord of the Dead, or an asura saw this light, all of his rebirths in evil realms were cut off and he was born as a god. If any god saw this light, he attained irreversibility in the highest path and was endowed with the five supernatural powers. If anyone who had attained irreversibility saw this light, he attained unborn dharma-patience and the fifty dhāraṇīs [incantations] of virtue. Vajramati, all the lands illuminated by that light became stately and pure, like translucent porcelain, with golden cords marking out the eightfold path, luxuriant with the fragrance of various kinds of jeweled trees, flowers, and fruits. Light breezes blew gently through

them, producing soft, subtle sounds that expounded freely and unrestrainedly the three jewels, the bodhisattva virtues, the power of good roots, the study of the path, meditation, and liberation. Beings who heard it all attained joy in the dharma. Their faith was made firm and they were forever freed from the realms of evil rebirth. Vajramati, because all the beings of the ten directions were instantly enveloped in light, at six o'clock every morning and evening they joined their palms together and offered worship. Vajramati, until the time he attained buddhahood and nirvāṇa without a remainder, the place where that bodhisattva issued forth from the womb always shone with light. And after his final nirvāṇa the stūpa in which his ashes were kept also gleamed with light. Consequently, the inhabitants of the heavenly realms called him the Eternally Light-bestowing King. Vajramati, when the Eternally Light-bestowing King, the Tathāgata, the Arhat, the Universally Enlightened One, first attained buddhahood, among his dharma-disciples there was a bodhisattva named Boundless Light, as well as a group of two billion other bodhisattvas. The great being Bodhisattva Boundless Light turned toward the spot where the Buddha was and asked about the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, and the Buddha expounded it. He was in his seat for fifty long eons. And because he protected the thoughts of all the bodhisattvas, his voice reached everywhere in the ten buddha worlds, even down to the smallest atoms, and it spread to hundreds of thousands of buddha lands. Because of the numberless different backgrounds of the bodhisattvas, he presented hundreds of thousands of metaphors. He called it the *Mahāyāna Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*. All the bodhisattvas who heard him preach this sūtra accepted it, recited it, and practiced it just as it had been explained. All but four of the bodhisattvas attained buddhahood. Vajramati, you must not regard them as exceptional. How could Bodhisattva Boundless Light be different from you? You are identical with him. The four bodhisattvas who had not yet attained buddhahood were Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and you, Vajramati. Vajramati, the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* has an abundant capacity. Anyone who hears it can attain the buddha path."

Then the Buddha again expressed himself in verse, saying:

Countless eons ago
 A buddha named King of Light
 Always shone forth great light
 And illumined innumerable lands everywhere.
 Bodhisattva Boundless Light
 First attained the way under that buddha,
 And requested this sūtra.
 The buddha accordingly preached it.
 All those who encountered it were victorious,
 And all those who heard it
 Attained buddhahood,
 Except for four bodhisattvas.

Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara,
 Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and Vajramati—
 These four bodhisattvas
 All formerly heard this dharma.
 Of them, Vajramati
 Was the most gifted disciple.
 At the time he was called Boundless Light
 And had already heard this sūtra.
 When I originally sought the way
 At the lion standard marking the buddha place,
 I too once received this sūtra
 And practiced it as I had heard it.
 Because of these good roots,
 I quickly attained the buddha path.
 Therefore all bodhisattvas
 Ought to uphold and preach this sūtra.
 After you have heard it
 And practiced just as it has been explained,
 You will become buddhas just like I am now.
 If a person upholds this sūtra,
 He will comport himself like the World-honored One.
 If a person obtains this sūtra,
 He will be called 'Lord of the Buddhadharma,'
 And then, on behalf of the world, he will protect
 What all the buddhas proclaim.
 If anyone upholds this sūtra,
 He will be called 'The Dharma King,'
 And in the eyes of the world
 He will deserve to be praised
 Like the World-honored One.

Then, when the World-honored One had finished expounding this sūtra,
 Vajramati, together with the four groups of bodhisattvas, the gods, the gan-
 dharvas, the asuras, and the rest, rejoiced at what they had heard the Buddha
 explain, and they practiced it as they had been told.